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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the conflicts Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) face such as: personal, departmental, institutional, regional, and national, and presents possibly solutions for reducing the stress related illnesses attendant with the work. Often administrators' responses are somatic: conflict becomes a physical trope and administrators speak through illness, and conflict as a physical trope could be related to the construction of gendered bodies. Those who might be called "postmodern body theorists" such as Judith Butler, Shannon Bell, Luce Irigaray, and Carl Raschke offer understanding about and possibilities for moving beyond somatic responses. There may be healthier responses that allow for the body to speak, at least metaphorically. Although one WPA is responsible for writing at Portland State University, the university's writing requirements were abolished in 1994, and she therefore lacks any direct authority. As a way of trying to take more control over her body, she has tried to create heuristics for understanding and taking action. She finds that simple perspectives, such as considering questions about locus, process, politics, metaphor, history, existence, and systems, can serve as starting points to allow for a different kind of response to conflict. For her, systems thinking holds the most promise for understanding departmental and institutional conflict. When she looks at conflicts through the aforementioned perspectives, she finds herself continually revisiting notions of gendered bodies. More than one scholar has noted the direct feminized identity of composition studies. Perhaps understanding the gendered, feminized state of the WPA in relation to somatic response can help WPAs speak more through the healthy body and less through the conflicted ill body. (NKA)

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# Inscribing Our Work as WPAs: Gendered Bodies and Conflict as Physical Trope

A few years ago my friend Amber Dahlin and I began work on a book called The Inevitably of Conflict in Composition Communities. While this book remains unpublished, the essays we collected from Writing Program Administrators were at once disconcerting and a kind of relief--disconcerting because they displayed such deep and far ranging conflicts, a relief because they validated our sense of the conflicts within which we felt ourselves trapped. The conflicts WPAs face run the gamut: personal, departmental, institutional, regional, national. In this paper, however, I am interested more in our bodily reactions to these conflicts than the conflicts themselves. As I read through the essays that were submitted for Amber's and my manuscript and as I have talked to other WPAs, I have come to realize just how often our responses are somatic. Conflict becomes a physical trope and we speak through illness. Ultimately I believe that conflict as physical trope is related to the construction of gendered bodies.

The work of what we might call postmodern body theorists such as Judith Butler, Shannon Bell, Luce Irigaray and Carl Raschke offer understanding about and possibilities for moving beyond these somatic responses. They remind me that the body is not a passive surface, but rather that it is a discursive surface. If for any reason verbal response is dangerous, denied, or simply unattainable, the corporeal body speaks. Lyotard suggests that "In the differend, something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers

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from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases in the right way" (qtd in Raschke 9). Or as Raschke frames it, the unsaid, the unthought--"it is the speaking of the unspoken that writhes toward articulation in the wilderness of contemporary culture" (9). We can see the verbal silence that arises because of conflict, then, as this suffering from not being able to put the "phrases in the right way." Raschke's "writhing articulation" is the physical trope. It is the somatic rhetoric we see in the history of hysteria, in the work of a mystic like Margery Kempe, in the self-mutilation common to many survivors of sexual assault, and in the faces of those struggling with anorexia and bulimia. While these responses may be voiceless, they are definitely not silent, they are rhetorical responses of a different kind, of corporeality. It is the state of my own body and of my many colleagues who suffer illness, of course, that brings me to this topic. I do not want to construct myself or others as victims. I do want to offer some particular readings that might shift us into new understandings and, hopefully, actions. What I hope to suggest by the end of my paper is that there may be healthier responses that allow for the body to speak, at least metaphorically. And let me say, as an aside before you become too disturbed at what might seem like a very anti-postmodern essentializing of the body that essentializing is not my intent. To essentialize is, of course, a danger when one speaks of physical tropes on real bodies. What I mean, however, is well said by Raschke:

> The concept of the body in the postmodern context, of course, refers to something more than mere physical agent. *Body* itself becomes a 'metaphor' . . . becomes a metaphor for the dance of signification. The 'dance' of the metaphoric postmodern--and the body as infinite sign-ensemble, as 'semio-text', as the cipher of culture--

> surpasses all implicit modernisms to the extent that it belies the privatized substantial self of the old metaphysics and the old aesthetics. (12)

The body, then, is not a free agent. It is not merely a biological construction. As Raschke argues it is also a metaphor and a text that culture both writes and writes upon. It is a page where a semio-text is produced. I am suggesting that the body in conflict, in this case the WPA body, has conflict written to it and the semio-text in my case, in many of our cases, is illness.

With this understanding of the body in mind, then, why should the WPA's positioning within conflict result in such physical responses, texts of illness? What would tie us to the anorexic or the hysteric? Perhaps it is dependent both on the locus of individual WPAs and the locus of writing programs in general. We have often felt like the ugly step children of literature programs and this has meant a great deal of anger, conflict, and bad blood. Often we are criticized by the university community for not taking care of the students' adolescent behavior. Much like a bad mother who has not taught her children to speak politely in public, we are chastised for not teaching them their grammar manners. Our programs are supported on the backs of non-tenured, fixed-term faculty or TAs who are paid badly and are seen as easily dispensable by higher administration when budget gets tight. A list of the conflicts could go on ad nauseam.

Like most WPAs I face these larger commonly shared structural conflicts. Since 1994, however, I have faced a local conflict that arises from the abolishment of the writing requirements at Portland State. I find myself responsible for writing in the university but I lack any direct authority. The

teaching of writing goes on outside of my realm. I don't want to go into the specifics of the current situation since I have done so elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the tensions and conflicts abound. What I am more interested in at the moment is my somatic reaction to these tensions. While I believe I have been proactive, vocal, and at least somewhat smart in dealing with these conflicts, I still find myself speaking somatically--the tensions become physical trope, which becomes chronic illness. If we are to understand Raschke, this is an expected response for the body in postmodern culture. But this rhetorical response is deadly.

As a way of trying to take more control over my body I have tried to create heuristics for understanding and taking action; I'm looking for a verbal trope--or a body trope--that results in something other than physically ill trope. I seek a reflective and reflexive stance that can help me understand more fully the situations we face as WPAs. I wish to become a more active reader of my conflicts, of our conflicts. In that spirit I have been trying out simple perspectives by which I might make space for a different kind of response to conflict. They are as follows:

* Locus Where does the conflict reside? Is it primarily personal? Does it have to do with identity formation? Is it related to role negotiation? To problems every teacher or administrator faces? Is it primarily situational, a creature spawned of the department or institution? Is it a result of a clash of values or ideologies?

* Process What is the narrative of this conflict? Where and when does it happen (or did it happen)? What are the causes and effects? When did it begin? How will it end?

* Political What forces are at work in this conflict? Who or what is fueling it? Who is benefiting from it? When and where does it manifest itself? What is the source of power and who wields it?

* Metaphor Using Peter Elbow's work (*Writing With Power)* as a starting point, create metaphors to describe the conflict. If it were a machine, what would be wrong and how would you fix it? If it were an animal, what would it be and why? If it were a law, who enacted it and who's breaking it? If it were a jigsaw puzzle, how would the pieces fit together?

* History What is the history of this conflict? Is it similar to or different from other conflicts in this department or institution? What factors have changed over time to create this conflict? To keep it alive? To bury it?

* Existence What alternatives explain why this conflict exists? (It's my fault, it's his/her/their fault, it's divine decree, the world is descending into chaos and this is just one sign.) Who started the conflict? Is it a product of evolution or creation?

* Systems How is this conflict part of a system? How does the system support, perpetuate, or ignore this conflict? How powerful are individuals in the system? What are the points of leverage in the system, the points that are possible sites or catalysts for change?

There are, of course, many possible frameworks, and I offer these only as starting points. And while these may seem simple and like weak potion against the kind of somatic responses Raschke describes and my own body displays, they seem at least a starting point, for without some sense of option, reading conflict is like being lost in a maze.

At the risk of sounding like a corporate co-option, I have come to believe that systems thinking holds the most promise for understanding departmental and institutional conflict. Our culture is inculcated with a

belief in individualism. The power of the individual is one of our cultural icons, a part of American lore. But obviously individuals have more power within systems and institutions when they work together. Immense changes have taken place in working conditions within American factories, for instance, because of organized unions--people willing to examine and take on the situation collectively.

Since society and its systems and institutions affect people--indeed, create individuals, to promote change we need to envision transformation as a dialectical process between individuals, groups of individuals, and the structures which surround them. We need to look at systems in society and their interrelationships in order to figure out the best leverage for change. We need to broaden our thinking to larger systems, to understand how those systems work, and to learn how to change them.

But where has trying to apply these perspectives to my work led me and how have they helped me understand conflict as physical trope? When I have looked at what I perceive as conflicts through the perspectives I have outlined, I find myself continually revisiting notions of gendered bodies. The work we do, the field itself, is a gendered site. Robert Connors, through a historical lens that might have begun for him through many of the same questions that I ask, has noted the number of women in the field and the place of writing programs in the academic hierarchy in his article "Rhetoric in the University: The Creation of an Underclass." More than one scholar has noted the direct feminized identity of composition studies. Sue Ellen Holbrook's now oft quoted study "Women's Work: The Feminizing of Composition" (4Cs presentation 1988) pushed startling numbers to the forefront of our consciousness--high numbers of women in composition and

higher numbers still in part-time positions. Susan Miller, in what I consider a systems-like analysis, pushes the argument further in "The Feminization of Composition." Of her title, Miller writes:

> "Feminization" calls to mind both positive new moves in composition to gender-balance research and teaching and negative associations with the actual "feminization" of a field that collects, like bugs to a web, women whose persistently marginalzed status demands political action. (39)

Miller further suggests that ultimately the female is rendered lower-status and that this particular rendering is "embodied" within composition studies. Her term "embodied by" is crucial, of course, to my understanding of the physical trope of illness as a response, at least in part, to the WPA as a gendered construct. For surely, the female body is a contested site, and if the WPA is in any way constructed as feminine the body of the WPA is a body in conflict. The feminine is coded in various ways: as mother, as wife, as girl, as whore. If not visible in these constructs the female body is often invisible to culture and language. "Because the female body is located where the man is 'not': the privacy of the home, the refuge from war, the street of clothing shops, the tea garden" (Raschke 42), and I would add the writing program, then the female body becomes visible, speaks through illness, anorexia, bulimia, or as I think of Margery Kempe inparticular here, through something coded as hysteria.

But what do we make of the fact that men clearly outnumber women in positions of authority within writing programs? While more women have stepped into the role of writing program administrator, it remains that

the majority of WPAs are male. So is it only writing programs as a whole that are feminized and not the WPA position? Is the WPA somehow the stern father keeping the daughters in line? Perhaps for some, and if so, then perhaps these male individuals work through conflict in non-bodily ways. But it is more complex than this, I think. The male WPA is still in a feminized position because of the place of composition in the superstructure. I would argue that men in the humanities are feminized to a degree, men in literature even more so, and men in composition far more than men in literature. The hard sciences are, of course, the most manly of the academic enterprises. And while literature in this gendered structure hovers far above composition because of its privileged work of interpretation and theory, it too is a soft feminized place within the larger structure. This helps explain why literature faculty remain invested in upholding the composition/literature split with literature firmly on the top in the "manly" position. You can see then, that the male WPA is not necessarily free from the devastating effects of this feminized embodiment. Indeed, my predecessor at Portland State stepped down from the position in a state of physical meltdown--high blood pressure, drastic weight loss, severe depression. Interestingly enough, four years later he is back, this time as department chair. He is strong, happy, and apparently healthy. There is a difference, a gendered difference, I would wager, between the two positions--WPA is more completely feminized. Of course, this situation raises questions not only about feminized bodies but about academic class as well. While I don't explicitly take it up here, it is true that there are different "feminized spaces" dependent on academic class. For instance, as a female, tenured administrator I do not occupy the same space as a part-time instructor, male or female. Likewise, I don't occupy the same feminized space as a male administrator, tenured or not. And if we add race

to the equation the rendering of class and feminization grow even more complex.

The issues of class and gendered bodies does leave me unsettled in my mind, however, about the female WPA in this mix. Is she somehow double feminized by her placement in composition studies? Or is she somehow masculinized when she steps into the WPA position since there is perhaps some power and authority (or at least perceived power and authority) that goes with the job? Certainly the notion of the feminized feminine is a nasty bind to find one's self in considering the status of the feminine in culture. I am inclined to argue, however, that the masculinized woman is even in a more interesting bind. I can't help but queer the notion of the female WPA as masculinzed, and when I do, she is rendered butch. In the hegemonic, heterosexist world of both the academic and larger culture, female butch is both threatening and despised. Female butch gives rise to fear response in both women and men; it is often the butt of cruel and demeaning sexual jokes. Only in the fantasy land of Hollywood is tough female butch in the likes of Jody Foster and soft male butch in the likes of James Dean adored and accepted. Feminized or masuclinized, then, the female WPA is tangled in binds.

But however tight the binds, if we understand that ontologically, historically, and epistemologically the figuration of masculine reason is disembodied body (Butler 39), then the figuration of the feminine is embodied body. Body becomes the discursive site, but also the physical site. As composition studies, and likewise the WPA, embodies the female body conflict is troped on the body. The question then becomes what we do about this feminized position that is at the heart of conflict resulting in physical trope. The conflict is not likely to go away so that leaves working with the

feminized construct in a less corporeal way as the most likely avenue. But I don't really have answers. As Miller points out:

> moves toward equality for composition reproduce the hegemonic superstructure by implying that bourgeois-social climbing and successful competition for intellectual "clout" are legitimate signs of improvement. (51)

I agree with Miller that they are not improvements. These attempts to become equal merely uncritically accept and support the very system that renders us low-status feminine rather than overturning the system as some would like to believe. Miller does point us in the right direction when she suggests that composition is an "active, existing site for dismantling particularly troublesome versions of hegemonic discursive common sense" (52). What we need to do in order to form reponses other than those that manifest as crippling somatic rhetorics is to do this dismantling. The problem, for me at any rate, remains one of practicality. Theoretically I have found some interesting possibilities.

One might turn to Irigaray's notion of becoming the mime, of insinuating oneself into the language of the father. Butler, in Bodies *that Matter* , says of Irigaray's argument that

> Disavowed, the remnant of the feminine survives as the *inscriptional space* of that phallogocentrism, the specular surface which receives the marks of a masculine signifying act only to give back a (false) reflection and guarantee of phallogocentric self-sufficiency, without making any contribution of its own. (39)

In this insinuation the power lies in the mimic and the false reflection. It disrupts the phallogocentric inscriptional space. Irigaray argues that even hegemonic discourses are not closed systems and thus contain gaps and fissures that we can fill with the mime's voice. Irigaray's metaphor of "two lips" also presents us with alternatives to the ill body. The "two lips" is a referent for woman speaking. When the female subject is imagined in these terms that subject is polyvocal; the multiplicity of voices lessens the likelihood of speaking through the ill body. There is no reason why when we are speaking of the "two lips" as metaphor for the subject speaking that the subject can not be constructed as feminine and not just female. Within the metaphoric construct lies a site for reimagining the male and female ill body.

Shannon Bell in *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* extends another possibility for resisting the figuration of masculine reason and control as disembodied body that I find conducive to rewriting the ill body as healthy body. She argues for reading from the position of the philosophical clitoris. To do so creates a disruptive moment of and for politicization. She states of reading from the position of the philosophical clitoris that it is an "unfaithful reading: a reading that strays . . . producing that which does not hold as a reproduction or representation" (20). Bell argues that

> The clitoris represents that dimension of female sexuality--pleasure--which is superfluous to reproductive. . . The sexual body is the underside, the shadow of the spirit, that had to be mastered: a subtext always present, insistent in the text's denial of the body. (20)

So if the text the WPA is a leading character in tries to deny the female body (metaphoric or otherwise) its libidinal excesses, tries to master the body completely through the figuration of masculine as disembodied body, then perhaps the body finds another excess--that of illness. What does it mean, then, to read from this position that would not render the body ill? Bell suggests that "to read from the position of the clitoris is to read from the space between two contending discursive approaches" (21), the phallogocentric and the gynocentric both of which tend to delimit the female as privileged only in the reproductive, maternal category. As Miller argues:

> a female may be constituted 'a mother' and therefore as a person who will sacrifice her personal separateness to attend to the frequent and private bodily needs of young children...But the culture also produces 'motherhood', a symbolic domain that places a particular woman's self-sacrifice in an acceptable image of the Mother...for many feminist theorists it is well understood that no matter what range of individual, biological, intellectual, social, economic, class or other qualities people of the female sex may exhibit, this and other female identities. . . participate in similar cultural call to 'womanhood'. This 'hood' effectively cloaks differences to assure that females (and males) are socially identified by imaginary relations to their actual situations. (40)

No matter what the individual's situation, then, the cultural construct of womanhood and motherhood is the approved text. But also, I would note, the controlled text. According to Bell, the privileging of reproductive maternity has not led to the reversal of hierarchy that the privileging of the metaphorical libidinal clitoris might.

I find myself drawn to readings such as Irigaray's and Bell's because they suggest that it is in our difference, in our marginalized status that our power actually lies. The trick is to be conscious of and in control of, to exploit the differences for creative and constructive change, rather than to write the conflicts that arise because of these differences as illness to the body.

Certainly the ill body can be as disruptive to the machine as the possibilities offered by Irigaray and Bell. But the price is too heavy. If we choose either or both of Irigaray's and Bell's rendering of disruption, the fact remains that we need to imagine what these mean in practical terms. Postmodern feminist thought on the discursive and corporeal bodies propose our theoretical direction. Understanding the gendered, feminized state of the WPA in relation to somatic response, I can now learn to imagine the practical and political sites of action that Miller suggests exist. If I find those sites, no--when I find those sites--I will learn to speak more through the healthy body and less through the conflicted ill body.

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